



“Reformer” Before the Reformation: Regarding the Issue of Proto-Protestant Views of John Wycliffe

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Abstract. The purpose of the article is to analyze the teachings of the English Christian thinker of the 14th century John Wycliffe, in particular those of his provisions, which were later developed by the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century (on the supremacy of Holy Scripture, the abolition of the papacy, the use of preaching, etc.). Using the method of text analysis, the authors of the article point to the same interpretation of thinkers belonging to different historical epochs, the most important religious and political doctrines. The authors also pay attention to the fact that all the works of John Wycliffe were devoted to the development of the correct approach to the study and interpretation of the Bible. The English theologian claimed that Holy Scripture is the main guide in all matters of man's spiritual life, and that only in it alone is revealed the true meaning of faith. In addition to translating the Holy Scripture into the mother's language, J. Wycliffe concertize his views on religious organization, secular power and the relationship of these two spheres. The works of the Evangelical Doctor were devoted to the active apologetic of monarchical power, the creation of a strong secular state led by the king, which was subsequently reflected in the works of Anglican and then Puritan theologians: U. Tindela, T. Cranmer, J. Rogers, H. Latimer and others.

Keywords: Reformer · Protestantism · The reformation · The church
The holy scriptures · The papacy · The antichrist · The sermons

1 Introduction

English Christian thinker John Wycliffe (1320-1384) is rightfully considered the forerunner of the European reformers of the 16th century. In his many works, he put forward those ideas that the Protestant theologians subsequently developed. The speeches of the Oxford theologian laid the foundation for that struggle, which, according to Ellen White's just remark, “led to the liberation of not only individuals,

but also churches and entire nations” [5, p.72]. John Wycliffe stated in his sermons that the truth should be sought in the Holy Scripture, and not in the traditions of the apologists of the Roman Catholic Church. It was he who sowed the interest in the Bible, completely translating it into English from the Vulgate - the Latin text of Jerome, approved by the Catholic Church. The problems of the formation of national languages based on the text of the Bible, the creation of a strong secular state, touched upon in the writings of the evangelical doctor (so called Wycliffe his contemporaries) were later reflected in the works of M. Luther, W. Tindel, W. Zwingli, J. Calvin and many others. In this article, an attempt is made to analyze the main provisions of the religious and political doctrines of J. Wycliffe, which became the ideological basis for the formation of views of European religious reformers of the XVI century.

2 Research Methodology

The problematic field of this work is at the intersection of several research areas: intellectual and personal history, the history of religion, biblical studies and hermeneutics. The historical-genetic method used in this study makes it possible to identify the specific features of John Wycliffe’s religious and political doctrines and to trace the way in which his outlook is formed. The method of hermeneutical analysis provides an opportunity for a correct interpretation of the texts of the English theologian both from the point of view of belonging to the genre, the era, and as evidence of his inner peace and spiritual life. With the help of the historical comparative (comparative) method, it becomes possible to correlate the views of J. Wycliffe with the intellectual and spiritual quest of the era of Reformation.

3 Analysis of Research Results

The Oxford theologian anticipated many of the ideas of future reformers by opposing the basic tenets of Catholicism, rejecting indulgences and veneration of saints, as well as the doctrine of transubstantiation. Long before the speeches of Protestant theologians, John Wycliffe questioned the necessity of the existence of the institution of the papacy and called the Roman high priest “the godless monster,” “the most terrible Antichrist,” and his prelates - servants of the Antichrist. [15, pp. 423-427]. In his opinion, “these” shepherds of sheep “loved the worldly more than Christ, and, grazing their sheep, pour in them the mortal poison of the Antichrist” [15, p. 425]. Here is what the evangelical doctor wrote about the head of the holy throne in his main Latin-speaking theological composition, *Dialogue*: “The Avignon Sister, whom many consider the Pope, and some as the Vicar of Christ on earth, is the source of all ungodliness in a militant church, and if it is possible to say so, then the approaching Antichrist” [15, p. 423]. He, according to the Oxford theologian, leads a life different from the life of Christ, the Roman pontiff personally and in the person of his cardinals blaspheme the Savior, for Christ was poor, humble and obedient to the God-Father, and the papal curia lives differently [15, p. 423]. “Antichrist thinks of himself as God on earth and tries to take the whole church under his authority,” concludes the thinker

[15, p. 423]. John Wycliffe imputes to the pope the most difficult sins, alienating him from God and plunging into the Devil’s slavery. Similar expressions will also be found in the works of his compatriot William Tindel (1494-1536), interpreter of the Bible in English, who declared that the Pope had distorted the order of the world with lies and distortion, overthrew the Kingdom of Christ and established the Kingdom of the Devil, becoming his viceroy [11].

As for obedience to the law of God, the Roman pontiff, according to Wycliffe, distorts him, contrasting his law, built on “universal domination, mud, blasphemous pride” to the law of Christ [15, p. 423]. The evangelical doctor believes that a true Christian must live in accordance with the law of God, create the Covenant of Christ, fulfilling his holy life and study, and not believing instead of Christ in false prelates and sinful priests who are incapable of another life, except in pride and lust, laziness and gluttony [12, p. 259].

The evangelical doctor, as later the reformers of the 16th century, pays special attention to money-grubbing and an irrepressible thirst for territorial enrichment of the papal curia: “With one hand the pope collects treasures, the other - troops to settle conflicts by armed means” [15, p. 425]. According to Wycliffe, the Roman Catholic Church “became famous” for disbelief, homicide and the acquisition of untold riches. The Oxford theologian condemns the Catholic episcopate for illegally collecting tithes, taxes, posthumous gifts, donations in favor of the church, insinuations with wills, outright lasciviousness and much more, arguing that Catholicism is “a religion founded by sinful people.”

The abuses of the Catholic clergy, promulgated in the writings of J. Wycliffe, became at the beginning of the sixteenth century the subject of sharp criticism from his compatriot, the English humanist theologian, the dean of the Cathedral of St. Paul J. Colet (1466-1519) in his famous “Cathedral Sermon”, in which the theologian called for the return of the church to the lost ascetic and apostolic ideal. Colet underwent severe criticism of the way of life of the spiritual estate, consisting of four main vices: “devilish pride, carnal voluptuousness, greed for earthly goods and worldly pursuits.” With great regret, the English humanist said, “the canons are captured by the love of the world, and not of God” [4].

The problem of the secularization of the Catholic clergy will be examined in sufficient detail in the first third of the 16th century English theologian William Tyndel. He will accuse the papacy of many troubles that have fallen to the lot of Europeans, and among them: The great migration of peoples, the crusades, and the disintegration of the Christian church, numerous wars and international conflicts. In his writings, W. Tindel will often refer to John Wycliffe, one of the first, according to him, to openly condemn the actions of the head of the holy throne and his wards. Based on Matt. 6, W. Tindel will remind the clergy men that it is not possible to serve two masters: God and mammon; i.e. riches, covetousness, lust and vanities of this world [11].

The evangelical doctor’s statements were not limited to reproaches and censures against the papal Rome, he urged secular authorities not to obey the Roman pontiff: “The princes and lords must understand that we are not needed such a pope, not such a clergy for the study of Scripture, but humble laymen” [15, p. 427]. The secular princes, in the opinion of the theologian, must defend their kingdoms from the assassination of this Devil, drive out the envoys of the Pope-Antichrist everywhere and in no case obey

his laws [15, p. 427]. Such bold statements by the Oxford theologian against the papal curia would greatly undermine the already shaken authority of the Roman pontiff, and in the 16th century, religious reformers without any fear will call the head of the holy throne the Antichrist, leading the papacy to the most terrible of the accusatory concepts of the Gospel - the concept of the anti-Christ establishment. The initiator of the European reform movement, Martin Luther (1483–1546), in his famous treatise “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation on the Correction of Christianity” will give the Roman high priest an unflattering description: “The pope, rather, should be considered the enemy of Christ, called in the Scriptures” the Antichrist. « After all, his whole essence, all his actions and undertakings contradict Christ and only destroy the meaning of the deeds of Christ [3, p. 42].

Not finding excuses for the actions of the spiritual authorities and not hoping for their correction, Wycliffe declares the complete subordination of spiritual power to secular one. In the treatise “On the Royal Service,” the evangelical doctor insists that the spiritual power be under the control of the secular, since the last one is perfect [14, p. 13]. According to the Russian researcher Kuznetsova, an evangelical doctor was “a consistent supporter of Supremacy over the Church” [2, p. 134]. It is this provision that will become one of the leading in the political program of reformers.

By denying the pope supremacy over the whole Christian world, Wycliffe called for believing in his true head - Jesus Christ and come to him through the study of the Word of God, as set out in the Holy Scripture. Wycliffe proclaimed the Holy Scripture the only source of faith, an absolute measure in all matters of Christian dogmatism, and therefore he considered acquaintance with this book as an important step for all believers. Domestic researcher of life and creativity of Wycliffe and Kuznetsov notes that, according to the evangelical doctor, “Holy Scripture is sufficient for the righteous life of people without a Catholic church and its rituals” [2, p. 119]. As already mentioned above, Wycliffe translated the Bible into English, thus giving the opportunity to read it not only to learned men who know the languages of the original (Hebrew and Ancient Greek) and study the Holy Scripture in the original or Latin translation, but also to ordinary people in their mother language. Later the reformers will translate the Bible into vernaculars, but as a rule, not from the Latin translation, as Wycliffe did, but from the original sources - Hebrew and Greek texts. However, as W. Cooper observes, the Wycliffe’s translation of the New Testament was very close in spirit to the ancient Greek original [10, p. 36].

The study of Holy Scripture has become one of the priorities of the reform program of the Oxford theologian. Wycliffe developed his concept of the Bible as the law of God, therefore it is no accident that chapter 31 of the third book of the “Triologue” is called: “Christ’s law, i.e. Sacred Scripture, infinitely exceeds other laws “ [15, p. 238]. In this chapter, the author explores the semantic meaning of the term and gives him the following interpretation: “First of all, the words” Holy Scripture “denote Jesus Christ and the book of life in which all truth is inscribed, and according to John 10,” the Scripture can not pass away, which the Father sanctified and let into the world [15, pp. 238-239]. The Evangelical Doctor speaks of the superiority of the Holy Scripture to other religious books [7]. “Sacred Scripture is much more certain than any other books ... Because Jesus Christ is much higher than any ordinary person, so is His book or the Scripture containing His law much more valuable than any other book,” concludes the

Oxford theologian [15, p. 239]. According to Wycliffe, “Scripture is authentic in any part of it, because it contains the sayings of the Lord Jesus, and He can not lie and be mistaken, and mislead anyone” [15, p. 239].

Wycliffe insisted on studying the Scriptures by every believer, which was a bold step for that time, as the church had a monopoly on reading and interpreting the Bible. Only the Reformation was able to leave the believer alone with the Bible and give him the opportunity to judge God himself. Oxford professor anticipated this important requirement of the European reformers, he recognized for every believer the right to be guided in matters of faith by his own interpretation of the Bible, but in his works Wycliffe gave some recommendations for the correct study of this book. The evangelical doctor insists that every believer try to find in the Scripture a literal meaning and beware of interpreting this complex source without having the Holy Spirit in his heart, for “such an interpreter, according to Jerome, is a heretic, and he is even worse than the one who blasphemes, Pretending that he gives the Holy Scripture a meaning that he himself considers unknowable for himself” [15, p. 243].

An evangelical doctor criticizes scholastic scholars who, in pursuit of meaning, are addicted to reasoning and forget that many things should simply be believed. According to Wycliffe, there is nothing in the Holy Scripture about which “the heretic himself understood that this is ominous.” And then he, according to the Oxford theologian, “does not submit anything to his judgment, for the greatest mistake in his understanding comes from pride and stupid prejudice in the superiority of one’s own logic, while the logic of Scripture is the most correct, most accurate and most used” [15, pp. 241–242]. As rightly notes Shchelokova, “Wycliffe attributes an infinite authority to Holy Scripture and fundamentally distinguishes the Word of God and its human interpretation” [8, p. 188]. Subsequently, religious reformers will also criticize scholasticism based on the use of logic, reasoning, references to church authorities and a fourfold interpretation of biblical concepts.

Protestant churches are traditionally called evangelical, because they recognize the primacy of Scripture before the Tradition, the Words - before the church. John Wycliffe, as mentioned above, was also named by his contemporaries as an evangelical doctor, because that is how he prioritized, asserting that the Gospels are more authoritative than the church [12, p. 255]. Understanding Wycliffe of the Bible as the Word of God is consistent with the Protestant outlook. It is no accident that many evangelical doctor interpreted many key concepts of the Holy Scripture not in the traditional but in the Protestant manner, for example, the term clergyman {*priest*}, important for the Catholic church, he replaced with the elder in translating a number of passages of the New Testament (Matthew, 16:21; Mk., 7: 5, 8:31) [9]. The English translator U. Tindel did the same, enlisting the authority of his senior colleague [6, p. 90].

Great place in his reform program Wycliffe preached sermons as an important component of the spiritual life of a Christian. The concept of preaching is one of the main themes of his numerous treatises. According to Wycliffe, Christ Himself more determined the clergy to preach than to serve the Mass, for nowhere in the Gospel is the open text of the morning and evening (but only of the sacraments) spoken of, and the need for preaching is said everywhere [1, p. 374; 13, p. 112]. Thus, the Oxford theologian unambiguously hints at replacing the Roman clergy with simple preachers

who could bring the true teachings of Christ to the people. English reformer William Tindel, who insisted on the destruction of the institution of the priesthood, will later say: “The preaching of the Word of God is hateful to them, for it is impossible to preach Christ and not preach against the Antichrist, i.e., all those who by swords and false doctrines are trying to use the true teaching of Christ “ [11, p. 114].

4 Conclusion

Therefore, as the analysis shows, John Wycliffe anticipated many of the demands of the European reformers of the sixteenth century and formulated the basic principles of the future Protestant doctrine. His philosophical-theological and political ideas became extremely relevant during the autumn of the middle Ages and in many ways contributed to the emergence of a new Christian religion - Protestantism. Like future reformers, Wycliffe wanted the “true Word of God” to become available to every Christian. The emotional mood of the Evangelical Doctor in exposing the vices of the Roman Catholic Church was in many respects similar to that of the Protestant theologians of the 16th century. However, unlike future reformers, Wycliffe did not have a clear plan for creating a new church, reformed on the basis of Holy Scripture. His ideas are more enlightening in nature and are aimed primarily at eradicating the vices of the existing church, rather than at its elimination.

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